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# SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

OCTOBER TERM, 1961.

No. 700

HARRY H. HALLATT and MARY VALENTINE HALLATT,
*Petitioners,*

vs.

MARYLAND CASUALTY COMPANY,
*Respondent.*

**PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT.**

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# SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

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vs.

MARYLAND CASUALTY COMPANY,
*Respondent.*

## PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT.

Petitioners, Harry H. Hallatt and Mary Valentine Hallatt, pray that a writ of certiorari issue to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the fifth Circuit entered below on October 6, 1961.

## CITATIONS TO OPINIONS BELOW.

The jury verdict for the plaintiffs, Harry H. Hallatt and Mary Valentine Hallatt, and against the Garnishee,

Maryland Casualty Company rendered June 15, 1960, the Final Judgment entered thereon on June 17, 1960, the Motion of Garnishee for entry of Judgment and Alternative Motion for New Trial and Order denying same, and the Notice of Appeal in the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of Florida, Miami Division, are unreported and appear in the printed transcript of record at pages 80 through 94, nine copies of which are submitted herewith. The opinion of the United States Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, printed in Appendix A hereto, *infra*, App. A1 to A25, is reported in 295 F.2d 64.

## JURISDICTION.

The Judgment of the United States Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, was entered on October 6, 1961 (R. 282, App. A26, *infra*). Rehearing was denied on November 8, 1961 (R. 290, App. A27, *infra*). The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C., Section 1254 (1) and 28 U.S.C., Revised Rule 19 (1) (b) of the Supreme Court of the United States.

## QUESTION PRESENTED.

May a Federal Appellate Court sitting on a matter governed by the law of the State of Florida substitute its own theory of law in place of the theory of law pronounced by the Courts of the State of Florida in construing as "prejudice *per se*" the failure of an assured to attend the trial of a Florida automobile accident case when requested to do so by an insurer under the cooperation clause of a liability insurance policy issued and executed in Florida, in the face of decisions of the Supreme Court of Florida

requiring the question of prejudice to be submitted to a jury?

## STATUTORY PROVISION INVOLVED.

The statutory provision involved is 28 U.S.C. 1652, as follows:

> "1652. State Laws as Rules of Decisions. The laws of the several States, except where the Constitution or Treaties of the United States or Acts of Congress otherwise require or provide, shall be regarded as rules of decision in civil actions in the Courts of the United States, in cases where they apply."

## STATEMENT.

On January 11, 1956, one James R. Richardson, Jr., purchased an *assigned risk* policy of automobile liability insurance in Tampa, Florida (R. 231-236). On April 11, 1956, in West Palm Beach, Florida, the Petitioners, Harry H. Hallatt and Mary Valentine Hallatt, Canadian citizens, were passengers in the rear seat of an automobile when the automobile was struck in the rear by another automobile owned and operated by one James R. Richardson, Jr., who was then a waiter residing in Palm Beach, Florida (R. 14, 74). The Petitioners claimed damage for their injuries. Respondent investigated the accident and secured a written statement from Richardson (R. 14, 15, App. A2, *infra*). The Petitioners filed suit against Richardson and Respondent undertook the defense of that action. Before the case was finally set for trial on May 18, 1959, some three years after the accident, Richardson had moved to Massachusetts (R. 36, App. A2, *infra*). It is not claimed that Richardson failed to cooperate with the Respondent

from the date of the accident to the time when the negligence case was finally set for trial. During a period covering a month and one-half before trial, Respondent duly and repeatedly notified Richardson of the trial date and offered to pay his travelling expenses and insisted on his attending the trial. Richardson declined, stating that he had been out of work all of the preceding winter and had then secured a job painting bridges which paid him $200.00 a week. On May 9, 1959, Richardson wrote to the Respondent "I shall be unable to make it to Florida as I am working now" (R. 17, 21, 24-26, 236-240, 247, 251, App. A2, 3, *infra*).

Counsel employed by Respondent to defend the suit then moved for leave to withdraw as counsel for Richardson. That motion was denied and the case proceeded to trial. The trial Court granted the motion of Petitioners for directed verdict as to liability. The jury assessed their damages at a total of $8,797.00 for which amount, together with the costs of Court, judgment was rendered against Richardson. For the collection of that judgment Petitioners caused a Writ of Garnishment to be issued against Respondent, who defended, denying any indebtedness to Richardson based on a breach of the cooperation clause in the policy, from which judgment entered upon that verdict, the appeal to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit was prosecuted (R. 32, 37, 74, 80, 81, App. A3, *infra*).

The trial Court in the garnishment action charged the jury in part on the following theory of law: "I charge you that to constitute a breach of such a policy the lack of cooperation must be material and the insurance company must show that it was substantially prejudiced to some degree in the case which it was then trying as the original case by the failure of Defendant Richardson to

so cooperate." (R. 225), based on the trial Court's interpretation of the decisions of the Supreme Court of Florida in *United States Fidelity and Guaranty Co.* v. *Snite*, 106 Fla. 702, 143 So. 615; *American Fire and Casualty Company* v. *Vliet*, 148 Fla. 562, 4 So.2d 862; and a decision of the District Court of Appeals of Florida, Third District in *American Universal Insurance Co.* v. *Stotsberry*, 116 So.2d 482.

The United States Court of Appeals held that this was an erroneous theory of law in that the cited decisions insofar as they purported to require necessity of proof of prejudice by the insurer was mere dicta which the Federal Court was not required to follow and since the United States Court of Appeals could not find any authoritative precedent, it was deemed appropriate to be guided by the period decisions of the 5th Circuit Court in the cases of *Royal Indemnity Co.* v. *Rexford*, 5th Cir. 1952, 197 F.2d 83, and *Rexford* v. *Royal Indemnity Co.*, 5th Cir. 1954, 215 F.2d 693, which it was contended by that Court's majority opinion, held the failure of a defendant to attend the trial was "prejudice *per se*."

## REASONS FOR GRANTING THE WRIT.

1. The breach of a cooperation clause of an insurance policy by failure of the insured to attend the trial when requested by insurer is not "prejudice *per se*" under Florida law but the materiality and prejudice of the breach is required to be proven before a jury by the insurer.

2. If the decisions of the Florida Courts requiring prejudice and materiality to be proven before a jury by the insurer be "dicta" in such decisions, the fact that this "dicta" was considered and repeated entitles it to the weight of law to which a Federal Court is bound.

3. A Federal Court in reviewing a matter covered by State law should not do its utmost to obviate the intent of that law so as to avail itself of the opportunity of applying its own theory of law, but is bound under the law to stretch its legal reasoning to the fullest extent to abide by pronouncements of the State Courts in conformity with the intent of 28 U.S.C. 1652.

I.

The Supreme Court of Florida in *United States Fidelity and Guaranty Co.* v. *Snite*, 106 Fla. 702, 143 So. 615, held that a failure of an assured to attend the trial was not such a breach of the cooperation clause as to permit the insurer to avoid coverage under the policy on two grounds, to-wit:

(a) The breach was not material nor prejudicial to the insurer, and

(b) The breach was not intentional by assured.

The judgment could be rested on either of the two grounds, however the *ratio decidendi* tends to favor ground (a). Under the rule of *stare decisis*, two of the cases cited in the Snite opinion had the following pronouncements in common:

> "Nor is it shown that it (breach) in any way affected the verdict of the jury." (parenthesis and insert supplied for clarity) *Taxicab Motor Co.* v. *Pacific Coast Casualty Co.*, 73 Wash. 631, 132 Pac. 393.

> "The record does not disclose any act of Price (assured) which had or could have had any effect upon the jury which induced them or in any way caused them to render the verdict against himself." (parentheses and insert supplied for clarity) *United States Fidelity and Guaranty Co.* v. *Williams*, 148 Md. 289, 129 Atl. 660.

It is reasonable to say that the Supreme Court of Florida had the above pronouncements in mind when it declared in the *Snite* case, *supra*:

> "Neither is it shown that if Scocos (assured) had been present at the trial he could have rendered any assistance to the surety company in connection therewith which would probably have changed the result of that trial." (parentheses and insert supplied for clarity.)

It is stated in *Parsons* v. *Federal Realty Corporation*, Fla. 1932, 105 Fla. 105, 143 So. 912, 920, by the Florida Supreme Court as follows:

> "Two or more questions properly arising in a case under the pleadings and proof may be determined, even though either one would dispose of the entire case upon its merits, and neither holding is a dictum, so long as it is properly raised, considered and determined."

The rule of the Supreme Court of the United States is to like effect:

> "Of course, where there are two grounds, upon either of which the judgment of the trial court can be rested, and the appellate court sustains both, the ruling on neither is obiter, but each is the judgment of the court and of equal validity with the other. Whenever a question fairly arises in the course of a trial, and there is a distinct decision of that question, the ruling of the court in respect thereto can, in no just sense, be called mere dictum." *Union Pacific Co.* v. *Mason City Co.*, 1905, 199 U.S. 160, 166.

In *State Roads Commission* v. *Johnson*, 222 Md. 493, 161 A.2d 444, it was held that where the court's statement was germane and may have been intended to guide the trial court upon retrial of the case, the statement was not dictum.

The United States Court of Appeals of the Sixth Circuit in Tennessee in *Farmers Mutual Insurance Co.* v. *Therion Omar Wood*, 277 F.2d 21, cited the decision of *American Fire and Casualty Co.* v. *Vliet*, 148 Fla. 562, 4 So.2d 862, as constituting the law of Florida in respect to the necessity of an insurer to prove materiality and substantial prejudice before the cooperation clause can be avoided. This constitutes a conflict between the Fifth and Sixth Circuits with respect to the Vliet case.

The fact that the *Vliet* case, *supra*, cited the *Snite* case, *supra*, with approval and reinforced that decision by pronouncing as a statement of Florida law:

> "The rule is that to constitute the breach of such a policy the lack of cooperation must be material and the insurance company must show that it was substantially prejudiced in the particular case by the failure to cooperate"

and both said cases were cited approvingly by the Third District Court of Appeals of Florida in *American Universal Insurance Co.* v. *Stotsberry*, 1959, 116 So.2d 482, when at page 484 the Vliet pronouncement, *supra*, was quoted, certainly indicates that this theory is to be used as a guide in such cases.

In determining the Florida law on this question, it is material to consider the highly important social need supplied by automobile liability insurance. The Legislature of the State of Florida had this in mind when it enacted its Financial Responsibility Law in 1955 (F.S.A. Chapter 324) of which the Courts of Florida approve.

This is especially true in a case such as this where an *assigned risk* policy is involved and the defense of contributory negligence was not available to the Respondent. Here, the insurer admitted coverage on the date of the accident

and injury, but claims a defense arising more than three years thereafter because of conduct of its assured, in which the injured persons had no part. In such cases, the courts will, of course, accord to the liability insurer all legally sufficient defenses, but they should (Judge Rives submits in his dissent), be slow to recognize technical defenses or those which are not really substantial (App. A17, *infra*).

II.

Assuming *arguendo* that all three statements of the Florida Appeal Courts are dicta, should these statements be wholly disregarded by a Federal Appellate Court? The rule in Florida appears no different than that in other common-law jurisdictions, that dictum by the highest court of the jurisdiction or by an appellate court, while not controlling, is entitled to respectful consideration. In like manner, the Appellate Court below affirms this theory of law in that in the case of *Miss. Valley Gas Co.* v. *Fed. Power Commission*, 5 Cir., 294 F.2d 88, at page 91, decided less than one month prior to the decision in the instant case (per Jones, Circuit Judge; Tuttle, Chief Judge; and Cameron, Circuit Judge, concurring), the Court said:

> "If as dicta the statements are to be treated, they must nevertheless be regarded as considered and repeated dicta, and therefore highly persuasive of the correctness of the Commission's decision."

Similarly, other courts in considering the question of dicta have stated as follows:

> "Considered dictum of state courts of last resort should not be ignored when a federal court is attempting to construe or ascertain the meaning of local law. *Mattson* v. *Central Elec. & Gas Co.*, C.A. Neb. 1949, 174 F.2d 215. See also *U. S.* v. *Roemig*, D.C. Iowa 1943, 52 F. Supp. 857."

"Even though a declaration by the state court was a dictum in the case in which it was made, it must be accepted by the federal court as final, where it was cited and approved by subsequent decisions of the state court as dispositive of the question in that state. *Gibson Coal & Coke Co* v. *Allen*, C.C.A. Ky. 1922, 280 Fed. 28."

An incongruous facet of the majority opinion of the appellate court below in construing *Royal Indemnity Co.* v. *Rexford*, 5th Cir. 1952, 197 F.2d 83, contends that the statement in that case with respect to the absence of the assured from the trial without explanation as being prejudice *per se* to the insurer and having a material effect on the verdict to be the law of the case, whereas, in reality the law of the case was, as is apparent from the second appeal in *Rexford* v. *Royal Indemnity Co.*, 5th Cir. 1954, 215 F.2d 693, 694, that the plaintiff cannot retry a damage case in a garnishment action for the purpose of deciding the issue of non-cooperation, and the issue of non-cooperation was for a jury. *60 A.L.R. 2d 1151.* It is difficult to rationalize a Court giving effect to its own dicta and refusing to give effect to the considered and repeated dicta of a state court in a matter governed by state law.

III.

The Federal Statute involved here, 28 U.S.C.A. 1652, *supra*, imposes a duty upon the Federal Court at all times to zealously preserve the laws of the several states. Any decision tending to abrogate or in any way lessen the intent of this statute, particularly in a matter of great social need, should be scrutinized with great perspicuity.

As was said in *West* v. *A. T. & T. Co.*, 1940, 311 U.S. 223, 236, 237:

> "A state is not without law save as its highest court has declared it. There are many rules of decision commonly accepted and acted upon by the bar and inferior courts which are nevertheless laws of the state although the highest court of the state has never passed upon them. In those circumstances a federal court is not free to reject the state rule merely because it has not received the sanction of the highest court, even though it thinks the rule is unsound in principle or that another is preferable. State law is to be applied in the federal as well as the state courts and it is the duty of the former in every case to ascertain from all the available data what the state law is and apply it rather than to prescribe a different rule, however superior it may appear from the viewpoint of 'general law' and however much the state rule may have departed from prior decisions of the federal courts. See Erie Railroad Co. v. Tompkins, supra, 78 (304 U.S. 64, 78); Russell v. Todd, supra, 203 (sic) (309 U.S. 280, 293)."

The appellate court below by tenuous means, endeavored to justify its position of "prejudice *per se*" by citing the 6th Circuit case of *Beam v. State Farm*, 1959, 269 F.2d 151, reflecting the intangible effect upon the jury both as to the question of liability and the amount of the verdict incurred by the insurer resulting from the absence of the insured from the trial (App. A12).

In view of the fact that the question of liability was not submitted to the jury in the instant case, the law of the *Beam* case, *supra*, could not be applicable, and the only principle of law involved would be whether the amount of the verdict in the trial court was such as to shock the conscience of the court, a principle not involved here.

Again, straining its utmost to apply its own theory of law the appellate court cited the Arkansas case of *Roberts*

v. *Commercial Standard Insurance Co.*, 138 F. Supp. 363, in the District Court for the Western Division of Arkansas, as supporting the Rexford case's purported law of "prejudice *per se*", whereas, in reality it affirmatively appears from the opinion in the *Roberts* case, *supra*, that the law of Arkansas required prejudice be proven by an insurer.

The appellate court below recognized that a great majority of the courts support the materiality and substantial prejudice rule contended by the Petitioners to be the law of Florida, by citing in its majority opinion (App. A5, *infra*) 29A Am. Jur. 588, *Insurance*, Sec. 1479:

> "While a few courts have taken the view that liability policy clauses requiring the insured to cooperate in the defense of actions under the policy by attending the trial and testifying where requested to do so, are to be construed strictly and in accordance with their plain terms, so that an insurer may escape liability by merely showing a failure or refusal to attend or testify, it appears to be the view of the great majority of the courts that the lack of cooperation by the insured in failing to attend the trial or testify must be substantial or material; and that a technical or inconsequential lack of cooperation is insufficient to void the policy. *Before the insured's failure to attend the trial can be regarded as a material breach of the condition requiring the insured's cooperation, the insurer must show that the lack of cooperation resulted in prejudice to the insurer.*" (Emphasis added).

## CONCLUSION.

For the foregoing reasons, this petition for a writ of certiorari should be granted.

Dated this 1st day of Feb, 1962.

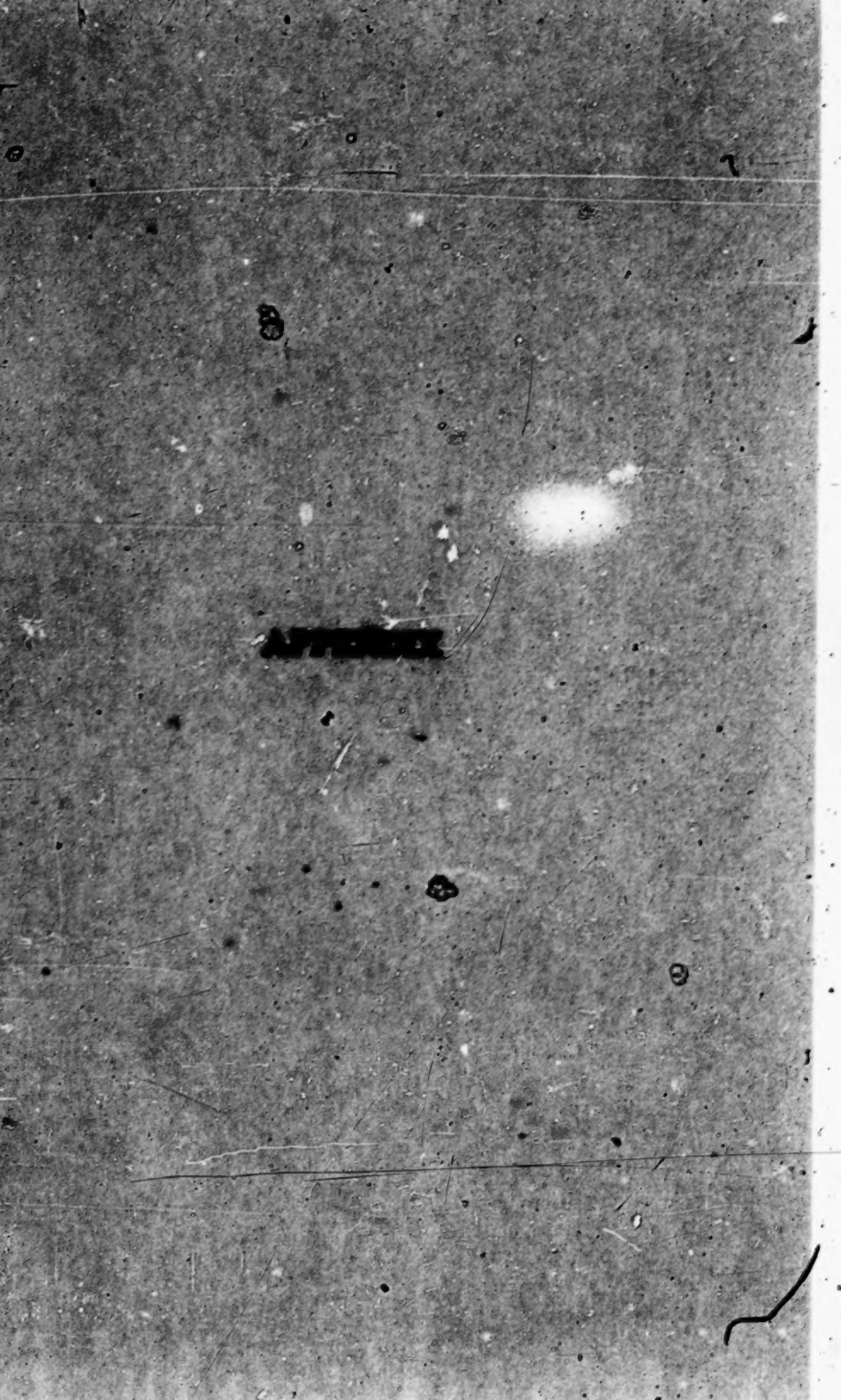
KELLY, BROOKS & ROPES,
218 Alcazar,
Coral Gables, Florida,
*Attorneys for Petitioners.*

By
*Of Counsel.*

## CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE.

I Hereby Certify That on this 1st day of February, 1962, a true and correct copy of the foregoing petition for writ of certiorari was mailed to the office of Jackson L. Peters, Esquire, attorney for Respondent, Knight, Smith, Underwood & Peters, 807 Ingraham Building, Miami 32, Florida.

LAWRENCE G. ROPES, JR.



IN THE

# United States Court of Appeals

FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT.

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No. 18485.

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MARYLAND CASUALTY COMPANY,
Appellant,

versus

HARRY H. HALLATT and MARY VALENTINE HALLATT,
Appellees.

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Appeal from the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida.

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(October 6, 1961)

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Before TUTTLE, Chief Judge, and RIVES and JONES, Circuit Judges.

JONES, Circuit Judge: On April 11, 1956, in West Palm Beach, Florida, the appellees, Mr. and Mrs. Hallatt, were passengers in an automobile involved in a collision with another automobile owned and operated by one James R. Richardson, Jr. Richardson was then a waiter residing in Palm Beach, and was insured by the appellant, Mary-

land Casualty Company, under a policy of automobile liability insurance which contained the following provisions:

> "No action shall lie against the company unless, as a condition precedent thereto, the insured shall have complied with all the terms of this policy . . .
>
> "Payment for loss may not be required nor shall action lie against the company unless, as a condition precedent thereto, the named insured shall have fully complied with all the terms of this policy . . ."

Under the caption "CONDITIONS," No. 17, "Assistance and cooperation of the insured" reads as follows:

> "The insured shall cooperate with the company and, upon the company's request, shall attend hearings and trials and shall assist in effecting settlements, securing and giving evidence, obtaining the attendance of witnesses and in the conduct of suits. The insured shall not, except at his own cost, voluntarily make any payment, assume any obligation or incur any expense other than for such immediate medical and surgical relief to others as shall be imperative at the time of the accident."

The Hallatts claimed damages for their injuries. Maryland investigated the accident, and secured a written statement from Richardson. The Hallatts filed suit against Richardson, and Maryland undertook the defense of that action. Before the case was finally set for trial on May 18, 1959, some three years after the collision, Richardson had moved to Massachusetts.

Maryland duly and repeatedly notified Richardson of the trial date and requested him to attend. Richardson declined, stating that he had been out of work all of the preceding winter, and had then secured a job painting bridges which paid him $200.00 per week. Maryland continued to insist on Richardson's attendance, and offered to pay his

traveling expenses. On May 9, 1959, Richardson wrote to Maryland, "I shall be unable to make it to Florida as I am working now." Maryland notified Richardson that, if he persisted in his refusal to attend the trial, it would disclaim coverage because of his failure to cooperate. Richardson politely, but adamantly, persisted in his refusal to attend the trial.

Counsel employed by Maryland to defend the suit then moved the court for leave to withdraw as counsel for Richardson. That motion was denied, and the case proceeded to trial. The trial court granted the motion of the Hallatts for a directed verdict as to liability. The jury assessed their damages at a total of $8,797.00, for which amount, together with costs of court, judgment was rendered against Richardson. For the collection of that judgment the Hallatts caused a writ of garnishment to be issued against Maryland.

In response to the garnishment, Maryland denied being indebted to Richardson on the ground that Richardson's conduct in failing and refusing to attend the trial of the negligence action brought against him amounted to a breach of Condition No. 17 of the policy, quoted *supra*. The jury in the garnishment proceeding returned a verdict against Maryland for $9,267.52. From the judgment entered upon that verdict this appeal is prosecuted. Maryland insists that the district court erred: (I) in denying its motion for a directed verdict; (II) in admitting certain evidence; (III) in refusing to give certain instructions to the jury.

The pretrial stipulation provided that:

"The sole issue to be tried is whether or not the assured James Richard Richardson, has voided the insurance coverage under Policy No. 2-2236179, for viola-

tion of the assistance and cooperation clause of the said policy of insurance, as set forth in paragraph 2 of the reply of the garnishee to the plaintiffs' traverse.

"The following issues of fact, and no others, remain to be litigated upon the trial:

"(A) Maryland Casualty Company contends that the policy of automobile liability insurance was voided by its insured, James Richard Richardson, by violation of the assistance and cooperation clause of the said policy of insurance.

"(B) The plaintiffs contend that the good faith and diligence of the garnishee with respect to the insured and the plaintiffs is an issue of fact to be resolved."

It is not claimed that Richardson failed to cooperate with Maryland from the date of the accident on April 11, 1956, to the time when the negligence case was finally set for trial on May 18, 1959. The claim is that Richardson's refusal to attend the trial was such a breach of the condition as to relieve Maryland of its obligation to pay for the loss.

Maryland put one of its claim agents, Leonard W. Lafferty, Jr., on the stand and by him established that letters had been sent to the insured advising him of the date of the trial, requesting his attendance and offering to advance such sums as might be required to cover expenses of attending the trial. On cross-examination he was asked by counsel for the Hallatts as to whether or not Richardson's testimony would have been helpful. Over objection by Maryland he was required to answer. Maryland's claim manager, Thomas B. Barton, was put on the stand by it to show his efforts in attempting to produce Richardson's presence at the trial. On cross-examination, over objection,

he was required to say whether, in his opinion, Richardson's testimony would have been helpful. The answers given to these questions were equivocal. Lafferty said he didn't know and Barton said it would be hard to say.

The objections were made to the testimony on the ground that it was improper to admit evidence for a purpose of showing that the insurance company was not prejudiced in the absence of the insured from the trial. It has been said that:

> "While a few courts have taken the view that liability policy clauses requiring the insured to cooperate in the defense of actions under the policy by attending the trial and testifying, where requested to do so, are to be construed strictly and in accordance with their plain terms, so that an insurer may escape liability by merely showing a failure or refusal to attend or testify, it appears to be the view of the great majority of the courts that the lack of cooperation by the insured in failing to attend the trial or testify must be substantial or material, and that a technical or inconsequential lack of cooperation is insufficient to void the policy. Before the insured's failure to attend the trial can be regarded as a material breach of the condition requiring the insured's cooperation, the insurer must show that the lack of cooperation resulted in prejudice to the insurer." 29 A. Am. Jur. 588, Insurance § 1479.

In discussing the same question the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit recently stated that a majority of American decisions hold that the failure of an insured person to attend a trial and aid in the defense when a case against him is called for trial, is prejudicial *per se*. *Potomac Insurance Co. v. Stanley*, 7th Cir. 1960, 281 F.2d 775. We have no academic interest as to which pan of the scales carries the greater bulk of the precedents. Our task is to

determine which of the conflicting rules is the law of Florida.

The earliest of the Florida cases to which our attention is called is *United States Fidelity & Guaranty Co. v. Snite*, 106 Fla. 702, 143 So. 615. There it appeared that the insured did everything he was requested to do by the insurer. The insured was not present at the trial. He was not asked to be present and the attorneys for the insurers made no effort to notify him at addresses furnished them where he might have been located. The insurer filed a motion for continuance stating that the insured was absent because he had not been informed that the case had been set for trial. The judgment was sustained because it clearly appeared that the insured had not intentionally absented himself from the trial. In the course of the opinion it was observed that it had not been shown that if the insured had been present at the trial he could have rendered any assistance to the insurer. In view of the court's holding that the cooperation clause was not breached because the insured's absence from the trial was not intentional, we do not regard as a ground for decision the comment regarding the failure to show that the insured could have rendered assistance if he had been present. The opinion, as we read it, does not announce a principle that a showing must be made that the presence of the insured would probably have changed the result of the trial. In the Snite case the cooperation clause required the insured to "aid in securing information, evidence and the attendance of witnesses, in effecting settlements and in defending suits . . ." and "at all times render to the Company all reasonable cooperation and assistance." The policy did not contain a provision such as is in the policy here which expressly requires the insured to attend hearings and trials. Even if it could be said that prejudice must be shown for

an insurer to be relieved of liability for a breach by the insured of a covenant to render cooperation and assistance, it does not follow that the rule would be applicable where the insured breached an undertaking to attend hearings and trials.

In the case of *American Fire and Casualty Company* v. *Vliet*, 148 Fla. 562, 4 So.2d 862, 139 A.L.R. 767, the automobile liability policy insured J.R. Battle and his wife. The insured car while being driven by Mrs. Battle was involved in an accident resulting in injuries to Clarence L. Vliet who recovered judgment against the Battles and garnished the insurance company. The Battles had moved from Florida to Georgia, J. R. Battle had become insane. Mrs. Battle declared her willingness to go to Florida and render any assistance she could if the insurer would guarantee her expenses. This was not done. The court held that an insured is not required to attend a trial at his own expense, and a failure to do so does not void the policy. The court, in its opinion, stated that the breach of the cooperation clause must be material and the insurer must show substantial prejudice. In this case, as in the Snite case which it cites, the decision was based upon the fact that the absence of the insured was justified. The court's observation as to the need for showing prejudice is, we think, *obiter dictum* and not a statement of the law of Florida which is binding upon us. The court cited with approval the case of *Bauman* v. *Western & Southern Indemnity Co.*, 230 Mo. 835, 77 S.W.2d 496, where it is shown that it is only an unexcused failure to cooperate which releases the insurer from liability.

The most recent of the Florida cases involving the cooperation clause in automobile liability insurance policies is *American Universal Insurance Co.* v. *Stotsberry*, Fla. App., 116 So.2d 482. The appellate court reversed a sum-

mary judgment for the insurance company. There was a question as to whether the insured knew that a suit had been brought against him so as to permit a finding of failure to cooperate because he had not been given notice of suit. There was a question as to whether the insurer had denied liability on another ground and, if so, whether such denial would excuse the insured's failure to cooperate. It was contended by the insurer that the insured had absented himself and so became unavailable for appearance at the trial. Citing the Snite and Vliet cases, the court held that there were fact issues as to whether the circumstances of the insured's absence or failure to cooperate were such as to amount to a breach of the cooperation clause. The cause was reversed for a trial of the fact issues.

It is our belief that the Florida appellate courts have not had before them for decision the question as to whether the unexcused absence of an insured from a trial, contrary to the express provision of a cooperation clause in an automobile liability policy of insurance, will relieve the insurer from liability without proof that the insurer was prejudiced by the insured's absence. Whatever may have been said in any of the opinions of the Florida courts was not essential to the decision. It was, therefore, mere *obiter dictum*. See *Pell v. State*, 97 Fla. 650, 122 So. 110. A federal court in a diversity case, adjudicating a matter arising under state law, has been characterized as "in effect only another court of the State." *Guaranty Trust Co. v. York*, 326 U. S. 99, 65 S. Ct. 1469, 89 L. Ed. 2079, 160 A.L.R. 1231. This being so, a federal court is not bound by a decision which would not be binding upon the courts of the state. *King v. Order of United Commercial Travelers*, 333 U. S. 153, 68 S. Ct. 488, 92 L. Ed. 608, reh. den. 333 U. S. 878, 68 S. Ct. 900, 92 L. Ed. 1153. The Florida courts have held, on a number of occasions, that the language in a judicial opinion which is not essential to the decision is

without force as a precedent. *State* v. *Florida State Improvement Commission*, Fla., 60 So.2d 747; *Twyman* v. *Roell*, 123 Fla. 215, 166 So. 215; *State ex rel Helseth* v. *Du Bose*, 99 Fla. 812, 128 So. 4; *Pell* v. *State*, *supra*. We conclude that the question as for the need for proving prejudice is not controlled by any of the decisions of the Florida courts.

Since we find no authoritative precedent of a Florida court it is appropriate that we be guided by the period decisions of this Court as, in effect, another court of the State. Cf. *MacGregor* v. *State Mutual Life Assurance Co.*, 315 U. S. 280, 62 S. Ct. 607, 86 L. Ed. 846, reh. den. 315 U.S. 829, 62 S. Ct. 903, 86 L. Ed. 1224. Pertinent to and, we think, decisive of the question under consideration are the two Rexford cases, *Royal Indemnity Co.* v. *Rexford*, 5th Cir. 1952, 197 F.2d 83, and *Rexford* v. *Royal Indemnity Co.*, 5th Cir., 1954, 215 F.2d 693. These cases were appealed from the District Court for the Southern District of Florida and were decided under the law of Florida. There, as here, the court admitted evidence on behalf of the plaintiff in garnishment for the purpose of showing that the failure to cooperate was not material since under the evidence there was no defense to the suit. Permitting the introduction of this evidence was characterized as retrying the damage suit and improper. In reversing the cause for a new trial, the Court, in the first Rexford case, held that the failure of an insured to attend trial would be material noncooperation. The Court quoted with approval from *Cameron* v. *Berger*, 132 Pa. Super. 484, 1 A.2d 529, 533, where it was said, "The very fact that the defendant was absent without explanation and could not be secured was prejudicial to garnishee's rights and would have a material effect on the verdicts." The Court approved the following statement from *Glens Falls Indemnity Co.* v. *Keliher*, 88 N. H. 253, 187 A. 473, 476, "Every

person familiar with the trial of cases by jury knows that the case of an individual defendant is seriously, if not hopelessly, prejudiced by his absence from the trial." This Court commented that the cited cases from Florida were to no different effect than those from which it quoted.

The case of *Cameron* v. *Berger, supra*, from which this Court quoted in the Rexford opinion, was affirmed by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania. *Cameron* v. *Berger*, 336 Pa. 229, 7 A 2d 293. The Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit in *Potomac Insurance Company* v. *Stanley, supra*, where Indiana law controlled in a diversity case, quoted at length from the first Rexford case and followed the holding of this Court that failure of an insured to attend a trial would be prejudicial noncooperation. In the opinion of the Seventh Circuit it said:

> "We think the majority view, that the failure of an insured person to attend a trial and aid in the defense when a case against him is called for trial, is per se, prejudicial, is consistent with the established principle of Indiana law that one who would seek to enforce a contract for his benefit must show that he has performed all conditions on his part required to be performed as a condition precedent to his right." 281 F.2d 775, 781.

The Florida law, like that of Indiana, requires that performance of conditions precedent, or a valid excuse for nonperformance, must be made to appear. *Ballas* v. *Lake Weir Light & Water Co.*, 100 Fla. 913, 130 So. 421. The rule announced in the Rexford opinion seems to be the law of Arkansas where the District Court for the Western District of Arkansas cited and followed the Rexford decision *Roberts* v. *Commercial Standard Insurance Co.*, 138 F. Supp. 363.

While insurance contracts are to be liberally construed in favor of the insured, yet such contracts are subject to

the same rules of construction applied to other contracts, and language used in a policy of insurance is to be given its popular and usual significance unless the context requires a different construction. *Aetna Casualty & Surety Company* v. *Cartmel*, 87 Fla. 495, 100 So. 802, 35 A.L.R. 1013; 18 Fla. Jur. 4, Insurance, Secs. 91, 92. The Supreme Court of Florida has considered the effect of conditions relieving an insurance company of liability and in so doing took occasion to say:

> "In Atlantic Coast Line R. Co. v. Beazley, 54 Fla. 311, text 392, 45 So. 761, text 787, we said: 'All parties litigant who are sui juris, whether railroad corporations or their employees, in the eyes of the law, before the courts, stand upon an equal footing, entitled to equal rights and protection and none to special privileges.' We would now add insurance companies and the insured, and that the persons insured, like railroad employees, cannot be said 'to be wards of the court.' We also held in the cited case as in Scotch Mfg. Co. v. Carr, 53 Fla. 480, 43 South. 427, that parties are free to make what contracts they please, so long as no fraud or deception is practiced and there is no infraction of law. We further held that the fact that one of the parties made a rather hard bargain would not avoid the contract. This being true, and the plaintiff having accepted a policy from the defendant with such a clause or condition of the contract therein, why should not the defendant have the legal right, in an action brought against it on such policy, to base its defense on such provision?" Southern Home Insurance Co. v. Putnal, 57 Fla. 199, 48 So. 922, 930.

Why, too, should not Maryland Casualty Company have the right to be relieved from liability because of the failure of the insured to attend the trial without having to show that it was prejudiced?

The word "prejudice" is one of different meanings. As used here it means that the insurer is hurt or injured in

that it is less able to resist a claim against its insured by defeating recovery or reducing the award of damages. *Long* v. *Brown*, 64 Idaho 39, 128 P.2d 754; *Itzkowitz* v. *Finer & Bachsach*, 218 App. Div. 440, 218 N.Y.S. 272. Whether or not the testimony of the insured would be beneficial to the defense, his presence at the trial would justify the jury's belief in his faith in the defense, as noted in *Rexford*, *supra*, and, as pointed out by the Sixth Circuit:

> "His failure to be present in defense of the claim can have an intangible effect upon the jury both as to the question of liability and the amount of the verdict, the net effect of which is difficult to measure. Unexpected developments in the plaintiff's evidence might be offset by an explanation on the part of the insured. Inaccurate or exaggerated testimony at the time of the trial may be prevented or held to a minimum by the mere presence of the insured." Beam v. State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co., 6th Cir. 1959, 269 F.2d 151.

The court cited, in support of the quoted statement, *Bauman* v. *Western & Southern Indemnity Co.*, *supra*, which was approved in the Vliet case. The Bauman case was also cited and relied upon in *Fischer* v. *Western & Southern Indemnity Co.*, Mo. App., 106 S.W.2d 490, from which this Court quoted in the Rexford case.

Our conviction that the courts of Florida would not require a showing of prejudice to an insurer in order that it might be relieved of liability by breach of the insured's duty to attend the trial is strengthened by the decision of the Florida District Court of Appeal in *State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co.* v. *Ranson*, Fla. App., 121 So.2d 175, decided in 1960. The condition which was breached by the insured was the clause requiring the giving of notice of accident as soon as practicable. The court took notice of the conflict of the authorities on the question as appeared in the annotation at 18 A.L.R.2d 443, 479. It

was held that since the policy contained a provision that no action should lie against the insurance company unless, as a condition precedent thereto, the insured shall have fully complied with all of the terms of the policy, the question of notice became immaterial once it became established that the notice was not given as soon as practicable. The policy before us contains a clause identical with the clause in the Ranson case to the effect that compliance with policy requirements is a condition precedent to recovery. We see no logical reason for a different rule where the breach is one of the clause providing for notice than in a case where there is an unjustified absence from the trial. We conclude that under the law of Florida, prejudice need not be shown.

Since the question of prejudice was not a proper issue the court's admitting, over objection, of evidence on the question was error, and for that error the judgment must be reversed. The insurance company attempted, by evidence, to show that it had been prejudiced but by doing so it did not waive its objections to the evidence offered by the garnishor which was improperly admitted. 1 Wigmore on Evidence, 3rd Ed., 345, Sec. 18. Cf. *Louette* v. *State*, 152 Fla. 495, 12 So. 168. The insurance company did not preserve objections to the court's instructions as to the necessity for proof of prejudice. See *Clark-Warwick, Inc.*, v. *National Fire Insurance Co.*, 5th Cir. 1961, 291 F.2d 828, and cases there cited. However, since the case was tried on an erroneous theory of law and evidence under that theory was received over objections, we do not need to reach the specification of error relating to instructions.

One of the issues in the district court was whether Maryland had exercised good faith and diligence in making efforts to procure the attendance of Richardson at the trial, and the Hallatts contended that the evidence

supported their contention that good faith and diligence were not shown. There was some evidence from which it might have been inferred that Maryland was hoping it could use the noncooperation of Richardson as a basis for disclaiming liability. The insurer must exercise good faith and diligence, but if it does so and is unsuccessful in its efforts, it will not be precluded for disclaiming liability because of its desire to be released. 6 Blashfield, Cyclopedia of Automobile Law and Practice, Perm. Ed., 74, Sec. 4059. So too, must the insured use good faith. If he is to be absent from the trial and the absence is to be successfully asserted as a breach of the policy, it must be shown that the absence was intentional and without legal excuse or justification. *United States Fidelity & Guaranty Co.* v. *Snite, supra.* There may be an issue as to whether, as said in the first Rexford case, the absence was accidental or incidental. 197 F.2d 85, 86.

In the usual case the question as to whether there has been an unjustified refusal to attend a trial so as to relieve the insurer of liability is one of fact for the jury. *United States Fidelity & Guaranty Co.* v. *Snite, supra; American Fire & Casualty Co.* v. *Vliet, supra; American Universal Insurance Co.* v. *Stotsberry, supra.* If, however, the evidence is without dispute and clearly shows a failure to cooperate, a directed verdict should be granted for the insurer. *State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co.* v. *Ranson, supra; Williams* v. *Employers Mut. Liability Ins. Co. of Wisconsin*, 5th Cir. 1942, 131 F.2d 601. See also *Associated Indemnity Corporation* v. *Davis*, 3rd Cir., 1943, 136 F.2d 71. Although the failure of the insured to attend a trial is, as a matter of law in Florida, prejudicial to the insurer, we think that, on the issues of the good faith and diligence of Maryland and the excuse or justification of Richardson for nonattendance, questions for the jury were present.

On the question of the failure of an insured to comply with a cooperation clause, the burden of proof is cast upon the insurer to establish the facts showing the breach by the insured. *United States Fidelity & Guaranty Co. v. Suite, supra; Williams v. Employers Mutual Liability Insurance Co., supra.* But the insurer is required to do no more than to show that it exercised good faith and diligence in an effort to procure the attendance of the insured at the trial and that the insured did not attend. It is not required to anticipate and negate all of the excuses and reasons that might justify the nonattendance of the insured. If, counsel has suggested, Richardson might have jeopardized his job by leaving it to attend the trial, but that he might have attended at a later date, this might have justified his breach of the policy provision. Cf. *State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. v. Palmer*, 9th Cir., 1956, 237 F.2d 887. If this was so, or if other excuse or justification existed for Richardson's absence from the trial, the burden of establishing it rested upon the Hallatts. 1 Jones on Evidence, 5th Ed., 375 *et seq.*, Sec. 207; *Grand Assembly, etc., v. New Amsterdam Casualty Co.*, Fla. App., 102 So.2d 842.

Since the case was tried on an erroneous theory of law as to the necessity of proof by Maryland that it was prejudiced by the absence of Richardson from the trial the judgment must be reversed. Since there are fact issues that the trier of fact should determine, the cause will be remanded for a new trial.

REVERSED AND REMANDED.

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RIVES, Circuit Judge, dissenting:

Richardson's liability to respond in damages for the injuries which he had inflicted on Mr. and Mrs. Hallatt

was fully covered by insurance on the date of the collision, April 11, 1956, and remained so protected for more than three years. Richardson declined to come from Massachusetts to Florida to attend the trial, stating that he had been out of work all of the preceding winter, and had then secured a job painting bridges which paid him $200.00 per week. There was no proof that Richardson could give any testimony beneficial to the defense of the negligence action. There had been no effort to take his deposition. The evidence of Richardson's liability was such that the trial court directed a verdict for the Hallatts on that issue. The Hallatts got a judgment against Richardson for $8,797.00. Maryland Casualty Company refuses to pay that amount to the Hallatts because it says that Richardson breached the condition of the policy providing for "Assistance and Cooperation of the Insured": "The insured shall cooperate with the company and, upon the company's request, shall attend hearings and trials and shall assist in effecting settlements, securing and giving evidence, obtaining the attendance of witnesses and in the conduct of suits." The district court admitted evidence, over Maryland's objection, from which the jury might, and probably did, determine that Richardson's mere presence at the trial was not material, and that his failure to attend was not prejudicial to the defense of the action. The majority holds that the failure of the insured to attend the trial in Florida is prejudicial to the insurer as a matter of law, and hence that the question of prejudice was not a proper issue for the jury. I agree with the district court.

Automobile liability insurance supplies a highly important social need. Without it few of the drivers on our highways could respond in damages to the victims of their negligence. Some of the States have recognized the social need by enacting compulsory automobile liability insurance laws. Many more encourage the taking of lia-

bility insurance by financial responsibility laws, or by other means. That social need should be kept in mind by the courts, especially in a case like this, where the liability insurer admits coverage on the date of the injury but claims a defense arising more than three years thereafter because of conduct of its insured, in which the injured persons had no part. In such cases, the courts will, of course, accord to the liability insurer all legally sufficient defenses, but they should, I submit, be slow to recognize technical defenses or those which are not really substantial.

In differing with the learned district judge, my brothers find that there is no case in point from the Florida appellate courts: "Whatever may have been said in any of the opinions of the Florida courts was not essential to the decision. It was, therefore, mere *obiter dictum*." I disagree.

In the first place, I do not agree with my brothers that every statement in an opinion not essential to the decision is mere *obiter dictum*. For example, in *Parsons* v. *Federal Realty Corporation*, Fla., 1932, 143 So. 912, 920, the Florida Supreme Court said: "Two or more questions properly arising in a case under the pleadings and proof may be determined, even though either one would dispose of the entire case upon its merits, and neither holding is a dictum, so long as it is properly raised, considered, and determined."

The rule of the Supreme Court of the United States is to like effect:

> "Of course, where there are two grounds, upon either of which the judgment of the trial court can be rested, and the appellate court sustains both, the ruling on neither is *obiter*, but each is the judgment of the court and of equal validity with the other. Whenever a question fairly arises in the course of a trial, and there is a distinct decision of that question,

the ruling of the court in respect thereto can, in no just sense, be called mere dictum."

*Union Pacific Co.* v. *Mason City Co.*, 1905, 199 U.S. 160, 166.

In *State Roads Commission* v. *Johnson*, 222 Md. 493, 161 A.2d 444, it was held that where the court's statement was germane and may have been intended to guide the trial court upon retrial of the case, the statement was not dictum.

Let me re-examine the cases from the Florida appellate courts to show why I disagree with my brothers' holding that the pertinent statements in those cases are mere *obiter dicta*.

In *U.S.F. & G. Co.* v. *Snite*, 1932, 143 So. 615, 616, the liability insurer defended on the ground that its insured had violated the condition of the policy requiring his cooperation in defending the suit. The insured had been absent from the trial of the damage suit. In the course of its opinion, the Supreme Court of Florida said: "Neither is it shown that, if Scocos had been present at the trial he could have rendered any assistance to the surety company in connection therewith which would probably have changed the result of that trial." My brothers dismiss that statement as mere dictum, saying: "In view of the court's holding that the cooperation clause was not breached because the insured's absence from the trial was not intentional, we do not regard as a ground for decision the comment regarding the failure to show that the insured could have rendered assistance if he had been present." With deference, I submit that my brothers have misapprehended the holding of the Florida Court. While it made the statement which my brothers paraphrase, that Court did *not* itself hold that the cooperation clause had not been breached, but merely held that the jury was warranted in reaching

that conclusion. To make that clear, at the risk of repetition, I quote somewhat fully:

> "The record fails to show any bad faith on the part of Scocos in connection with his absence from the trial. Neither is it shown that, if Scocos had been present at the trial, he could have rendered any assistance to the surety company in connection therewith which would probably have changed the result of that trial. The record affirmatively shows by the allegations of the motion for continuance above referred to, and by which allegations the surety company was bound, that Scocos had not intentionally absented himself from that trial.
>
> "The question of whether or not Nicholas Scocos violated the condition of the liability policy above referred to in such manner as to relieve the surety company of liability on its policy became a question of fact for the jury to determine, the burden of proof being on the surety company to show that such condition of the policy had been so violated. See Taxicab Motor Co. v. Pacific Coast Casualty Co., etc., 73 Wash. 631, 132 Pac. 393; U. S. Fidelity & Guaranty Co. v. Williams, 148 Md. 289, 129 Atl. 660; U. S. Casualty Co. v. Drew, (C.C.A.) 5 F.2d 498.
>
> "The jury resolved this question against the surety company. The evidence warranted that conclusion." (143 So. at p. 616.)

The failure to prove that the insured's absence from the trial prejudiced the defense of the case was *one* of the reasons which led the Florida Supreme Court to hold that the jury was warranted in resolving the question against the insurance company. True, it was one of several such reasons. It seems clear to me that the pertinent statement in the *Snite* case is not dictum, but is a part of the *ratio decidendi*. See *Parsons* v. *Federal Realty Corporation*, *supra*; *Union Pacific Co.* v. *Mason City Co.*, *supra*.

My brothers next undertake to differentiate the *Snite* case because the cooperation clause in the present case is more specific in requiring the insured to attend hearings and trials, saying: "The policy did not contain a provision such as is in the policy here which expressly requires the insured to attend hearings and trials. Even if it could be said that prejudice must be shown for an insurer to be relieved of liability for a breach by the insured of a covenant to render cooperation and assistance, it does not follow that the rule would be applicable where the insured breached an undertaking to attend hearings and trials."

With deference, I submit that the attempted distinction is not warranted. Under the present policy, the insured's duty to attend hearings and trials is simply a part of his broader duty to cooperate. (See the condition for "Assistance and Cooperation of the Insured," heretofore quoted.) Assuming that there could otherwise have been some doubt about the proposition, the policy made definite that the required assistance and cooperation include the insured's attending the trial upon the insurer's request. There is, however, no indication that the effect of non attendance is any different from the effect of any other failure to assist and cooperate. The Florida Supreme Court held in the *Snite* case, *supra*, that the jury, in determining the question of whether the insured had violated the condition of a liability policy requiring him to "aid . . . in defending suits" and to "render to the Company all reasonable cooperation and assistance," could consider the lack of proof that the insurer was prejudiced by his absence from the trial. The rule should not be different because the policy spells out the already obvious fact that cooperation includes the insured's compliance with the insurer's request to attend the trial. Under either provision, the failure to cooperate is not material unless it is prejudicial to the insurer.

In the case of *American Fire & Casualty Co.* v. *Vliet*, Fla., 1941, 4 So.2d 862, 863, the Court did hold as a matter of law that the insured did not violate the cooperation clause when she failed to come to court from a distant city at her own expense, and I would concede that its statement about the necessity of proving prejudice was dictum. It was nonetheless a clear and well-considered statement of the law of Florida, viz: "The rule is that to constitute the breach of such a policy the lack of cooperation must be material and the insurance company must show that it was substantially prejudiced in the particular case by the failure to cooperate."

That statement was quoted approvingly by the Third District Court of Appeals of Florida in *American Universal Insurance Co.* v. *Stotsberry*, 1959, 116 So.2d 482, 484. That Court reversed a summary judgment against the liability insurer and remanded the cause for further proceedings. The quotation was obviously intended to guide the trial court in determining "whether the circumstances of Lorenzo's absence or non-cooperation were such as to amount to a breach of the co-operation clause of the policy under the facts of this case." As such, the statement should not be reduced to the level of a "mere dictum" on the part of the appellate court. See *State Roads Commission* v. *Johnson*, *supra*. Nor can any attempted distinction be drawn as to the wording of the cooperation clause, for it was the same in that case as in this. See 16 So.2d 483, n. 2

Let me go further, and assume *arguendo* that my brothers are correct in holding that all three statements of the Florida appellate courts are dicta, what then? Are the statements to be wholly disregarded, as the majority opinion would seem to indicate? The Florida cases cited in that opinion go no further than to hold that dictum "is not controlling" in a subsequent case *State* v. *Florida*

*State Improvement Commission*, 1952, 60 So.2d 747, 750. The rule in Florida appears no different than that in other common-law jurisdictions, that dictum by the highest court of the jurisdiction or by an appellate court, while not controlling, is entitled to respectful consideration 21 C.J.S., Courts, Sec. 190, pp. 313, 314. My brothers themselves made a clear statement of the true rule in an extremely recent case: "If as dicta the statements are to be treated, they must nevertheless be regarded as considered and repeated dicta, and therefore highly persuasive of the correctness of the Commission's decision." *Miss. Valley Gas Co.* v. *Fed. Power Commission*, 5 Cir., No. 18501, m/s, decided September 12, 1961 (per Jones, Circuit Judge; Tuttle, Chief Judge, and Cameron, Circuit Judge, concurring). An immediate example is supplied by the Florida appellate court in the *Stotsberry* case following the dictum of the Supreme Court of that State in the *Vliet* case. This Court, as "in effect, only another Court of the State," should, I think, do likewise.

As was said in *West* v. *A.T. & T. Co.*, 1940, 311 U.S. 223, 236, 237:

> "A state is not without law save as its highest court has declared it. There are many rules of decision commonly accepted and acted upon by the bar and inferior courts which are nevertheless laws of the state although the highest court of the state has never passed upon them. In those circumstances a federal court is not free to reject the state rule merely because it has not received the sanction of the highest court, even though it thinks the rule is unsound in principle or that another is preferable. State law is to be applied in the federal as well as the state courts and it is the duty of the former in every case to ascertain from all the available data what the state law is and apply it rather than to prescribe a different rule, however superior it may appear from the viewpoint

> of 'general law' and however much the state rule may have departed from prior decisions of the federal courts. See *Erie Railroad Co.* v. *Tompkins*, *supra*, 78 [304 U. S. 64, 78]; *Russell* v. *Todd*, *supra*, 203 (sic) [309 U.S. 280, 293]."

Professor Moore collects the pertinent authorities in 1 Moore's Federal Practice, 2nd ed., p. 3312, in support of his text that:

> "The obligation to accept local law extends not merely to definitive decisions, but to considered dicta as well, and if explicit pronouncements are wanting, the federal court should endeavor to discover the law of the state on the point at issue by considering related decisions, analogies, and any reliable data tending convincingly to show what the state rule is."

Surely expressions to like effect in the opinions of two State Supreme Court Justices concurred in by their colleagues, and still further in an opinion of a State Appellate Court Judge concurred in by his colleagues, must rank *at least* as "considered dicta" to be used along with any other relevant data to ascertain state law.

By what seems to me to be a kind of bootstrap operation, my brothers consider themselves bound by two cases from this same federal Court of Appeals: "Pertinent to and, we think, decisive of the question under consideration are the two Rexford cases, *Royal Indemnity Co.* v. *Rexford*, 5th Cir. 1952, 197 F.2d 83, and *Rexford* v. *Royal Indemnity Co.*, 5th Cir. 1954, 215 F.2d 693."

The careful annotator in 60 A.L.R. 2d 1151 observed that this Court in *Royal Indemnity Co.* v. *Rexford*, 1952, 197 F.2d 83, "approved, arguendo, the statement that the very fact that an insured is absent from the trial without explanation is prejudicial to the rights of the insurer and has a material effect upon the verdict." I agree with the annotator that that part of the opinion was dictum. The de-

cision was expressly stated to be "because of the error in permitting the plaintiff to retry the damage suit, the case was not fairly tried on the issue of non cooperation." This Court stated unequivocally that "there is no doubt that, under all the authorities, the non-cooperation must have been material." (197 F.2d at 86). Further, the Court expressly denied any intention to direct the rendition of a verdict.

> "The case is a very close one as to whether there should not have been an instructed verdict in favor of the insurer on the ground that the insured failed as matter of law to cooperate, but we have concluded that the judgment should not be reversed and rendered on that issue."

(197 F.2d at 86). Upon remand, nevertheless, the district court did just that, and upon second appeal this Court again reversed, stating that "the decision in the former appeal, reported in 197 F.2d 83, became the law of the case and, as this court found at that time that it was not proper for a directed verdict to be granted . . ." *Rexford* v. *Royal Indemnity Company*, 5 Cir., 1954, 215 F.2d 693, 694.

The *Rexford* cases appear to me to support the rulings of the district court in the present case, if effect be given to their actual holdings rather than to dictum. Certainly, to my way of thinking, the cases of *U.S.F. & G. Co.* v. *Snite*, *supra*, and *American Universal Insurance Co.* v. *Stotsberry*, *supra*, are *decisions* binding upon this Court under the Erie doctrine. Under all of the Florida cases which have either passed upon or discussed an insured's breach of the cooperation clause of condition, I submit, the injured person may show lack of prejudice to the insurer and that the failure of the insured was immaterial and unsubstantial, and hence, not a breach of the cooperation clause within the fair intendment and purpose of that clause. I think that

the judgment should be affirmed, and therefore respectfully dissent.

A true copy

Test:

Edward W. Wadsworth

(Seal) Clerk, U. S. Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit, New Orleans, Louisiana

December 20, 1961

## JUDGMENT.

**Extract from the Minutes of October 6, 1961.**

MARYLAND CASUALTY COMPANY,

No. 18485 versus

HARRY H. HALLATT and MARY VALENTINE HALLATT.

This cause came on to be heard on the transcript of the record from the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, and was argued by counsel;

ON CONSIDERATION WHEREOF, It is now here ordered and adjudged by this Court that the judgment of the said District Court in this cause be, and the same is hereby, reversed; and that this cause be, and it is hereby, remanded to the said District Court for a new trial.

It is further ordered and adjudged that the appellees, Harry H. Hallatt and Mary Valentine Hallatt, be condemned, *in solido*, to pay the costs of this cause in this Court for which execution may be issued out of the said District Court.

"Rives, Circuit Judge, Dissenting"

Filed 8th day of November, 1961.

[268]—Jones Clara R. James

DY Clerk of the United States Court of Appeals.

IN THE

# United States Court of Appeals

FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT

**No. 18485.**

MARYLAND CASUALTY COMPANY,
Appellant,

vs.

HARRY H. HALLATT and MARY VALENTINE HALLATT,
Appellees.

Appeal from the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida.
(November 8, 1961.)

**ON PETITION FOR REHEARING.**

Before TUTTLE, Chief Judge, and RIVES and JONES, Circuit Judges.

PER CURIAM

IT IS ORDERED That the petition for rehearing in the above entitled and numbered cause be, and it is hereby DENIED.

RIVES, Circuit Judge, Dissents.

Office Supreme Court, U.S.
FILED
MAR 2 1962
JOHN F. DAVIS, CLERK

# Supreme Court of the United States

OCTOBER TERM, 1962

No. 700

HARRY H. HALLATT and MARY VALENTINE HALLATT,

Petitioners,

vs.

MARYLAND CASUALTY COMPANY,

Respondent.

## BRIEF OF RESPONDENT IN OPPOSITION TO PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI.

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## BRIEF OF RESPONDENT IN OPPOSITION TO PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI.

### STATEMENT OF THE CASE.

#### INTRODUCTION.

The petition for writ of certiorari brings here for review the opinion and judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, reversing a judgment of the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, Miami Division, (A 1-25). The District Court rendered a final judgment in favor of the plaintiffs (petitioners herein), Harry H. Hallatt and Mary Valentine Hallatt, and against the garnishee (respondent) Maryland Casualty Company, for the sum of

Nine Thousand Two Hundred Sixty-seven and 52 100 Dollars ($9,267.52). The case involves the obstinate, wilful and deliberate refusal of one James Richard Richardson, the Maryland assured, to attend the trial of a negligence action brought against him by the petitioners, and whether his conduct amounted to a breach of the cooperation clause of the automobile liability policy which Richardson carried with Maryland Casualty Company.

## IDENTITY OF PARTIES AND RECORD REFERENCES.

For convenience we will refer to the plaintiffs in the court below as "the petitioners" and to the garnishee, Maryland Casualty Company, as "the respondent." All references to the transcript of record will be preceded by the designation "R" and references to the appendix to the petitioners' brief will be preceded by the designation "A".

## THE FACTS

The petitioner Mary Valentine Hallatt was injured in an automobile accident in the City of West Palm Beach, Florida. She and her husband brought suit against James Richard Richardson, the driver of the opposing vehicle, claiming damages for personal injuries sustained in the accident. The case was removed to the District Court for the Southern District of Florida, on the basis of diversity of citizenship. The case was tried to a jury, resulting in a verdict and judgment in favor of the petitioners and against Richardson, in the sum of Eight Thousand Seven Hundred Ninety-seven Dollars ($8,797.00) (R 1,2).

Richardson carried a policy of automobile liability insurance with the respondent, which contained the usual cooperation clause requiring that "the insured shall cooperate with the company and upon the company's request shall attend hearings and trials and shall assist in effecting settlements, securing and giving evidence, obtaining the attendance of witnesses, and in the conduct of suits." (R 235) Richardson, who resided in Massachusetts, flatly refused to attend the trial of the case in West Palm Beach, Florida, although all arrangements were made for him by the respondent, including prepaid airline ticket, hotel accommodations and travel expenses (R 127, 128). He was promptly notified when the case was first set for trial, and repeatedly notified thereafter of his obligations to attend and give evidence in his own behalf (R 120-140). Every media of communication was employed, including numerous registered letters, telegrams, long distance phone calls, and personal interviews by representatives of respondent at the place of his residence (R 240-251). Richardson's only response was a brief letter in which he said "I shall be unable to make it to Florida as I am working now." (R 131) The attorneys for respondent then disclaimed coverage and moved the court for leave to withdraw from the case. (R 134, 135) The motion was denied and the case proceeded to trial, resulting in a verdict in favor of the plaintiffs. After judgment the petitioners sued out a writ of garnishment against respondent, which was tried to a jury on the issue of non cooperation in the Federal District Court in Miami, Florida, resulting in a verdict and judgment adverse to the respondent (R 80, 81). At the trial of the case respondent contended that under the law of Florida a wilful, unjustified refusal of the insured to attend the trial of the case was a breach of the cooperation clause of the

policy and amounted to prejudice to the insurer as a matter of law. During the course of the garnishment trial in the District Court counsel for petitioner, over the objections of respondent, sought to elicit from the respondent's witnesses the facts to which Richardson would have testified had he been present at the trial. Respondent strenuously objected to this line of inquiry, upon the grounds that it amounted to a retrial of the issues of the main action, and that it would amount to the grossest kind of speculation and conjecture to permit one Federal jury to speculate and conjecture as to what another Federal jury would have done if one item of evidence had been before it, without submitting to the jury the entire record in that case, including the argument and charges of the court (R 157). The objections were overruled by the District Court (R 158). The Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit, in a careful and well considered opinion, reversed the District Court and granted a new trial. It held, in effect, that an unjustified failure of the insured to attend the trial is as a matter of law in Florida prejudicial to the insurer (A 14, 15). The case was "tried on an erroneous theory of law as to the necessity of proof by Maryland that it was prejudiced by the absence of Richardson from the trial * * *." (A 15)

## THE PROPRIETY OF REVIEW BY CERTIORARI.

This case does not involve a Federal question of substance, a constitutional question, nor does it involve a conflict of decisions between circuits. It simply involves the correctness of the appellate court's interpretation and construction of the Florida law, in the absence of a controlling precedent. Like every problem its solution is important to the litigants. It is a matter of local interest to

a small segment of the Florida Bar engaged in insurance litigation. Construction of the insurance contract in accordance with Florida law has some academic interest, but viewed from the standpoint of the highest court in the land, it is simply a matter of isolated significance. A classic statement of the character of reasons which the court will consider on petition for certiorari may be found in the language of Mr. Justice Frankfurter, in **Rice v. Sioux City Memorial Park Cemetery, U. S. Iowa, 1955, 75 S. Ct. 614, 349 U. S. 70, 99 L. Ed. 897, 901;**

> "* * * In illustrating the character of reasons which may be deemed 'special and important,' the Rule refers to cases.
>
> "'Where a state court has decided a federal question of substance not theretofore determined by this court, or has decided it in a way probably not in accord with applicable decisions of this court.'
>
> "A federal question raised by a petitioner may be 'of substance' in the sense that, abstractly considered, it may present an intellectually interesting and solid problem. But this Court does not sit to satisfy a scholarly interest in such issues. Nor does it sit for the benefit of the particular litigants. 'Magnum Import Co. v. Coty, 262 U.S. 159, 163, 67 L. ed. 922, 924, 43 S. Ct. 531; see also Address of Mr. Chief Justice Vinson, before the American Bar Association, Sept. 7, 1949, 69 Sup. Ct. v, vi; Address of Mr. Chief Justice Hughes, before the American Law Institute, May 10, 1934, XI Proc. Am. Law Inst. 313.' 'Special

> and important reasons' imply a reach to a problem beyond the academic or the episodic. This is especially true where the issues involved reach constitutional dimensions, for then there comes into play regard for the Court's duty to avoid decision of constitutional issues unless avoidance becomes evasion. * * * "

We fail to see how the application of Florida law to a contract problem of local dimensions could be considered "special and important reasons" implying a reach to the problem beyond "the academic or episodic."

## QUESTION FOR DETERMINATION

IN DETERMINING FLORIDA LAW IN A DIVERSITY CASE, IS THE FEDERAL COURT BOUND TO FOLLOW STATE COURT DICTA WHICH THE STATE COURT ITSELF WOULD NOT BE REQUIRED TO FOLLOW?

## ARGUMENT

It is at once apparent from a reading of the opinion, that the Fifth Circuit did not misconceive its duty to apply the Florida law to the contract problem before it. Judge Jones stated at the outset:

> "We have no academic interest as to which pan of the scales carries the greatest bulk of precedent. Our task is to determine which of the conflicting rules is the law of Florida." (A-5, 6)

The Court then proceeded to carefully scrutinize the

Florida cases and determined that the statements of the Florida Court which had been urged upon it were merely ancillary, nonessential, gratuitous statements of the Florida court, which would not have been binding on that court itself. In **King v. Order of United Commercial Travelers, 333 U.S. 153, 68 S. Ct. 488, 92 L. Ed. 608, reh. den. 333 U.S. 878, 68 S. Ct. 900, 92 L. Ed. 1153**, it was held that a Federal court is not bound by a decision which would not be binding upon the courts of the state. Mr. Chief Justice Vinson, speaking for the Court, said:

> "* * * Furthermore, as we have but recently had occasion to remark, a federal court adjudicating a matter of state law in a diversity suit is, 'in effect, only another court of the State;' **it would be incongruous indeed to hold the federal court bound by a decision which would not be binding on any state court.**" (Emphasis ours)

The Florida courts have repeatedly held that the language in a judicial opinion which is merely ancillary and nonessential to the decision is without force as a precedent. See **State v. Florid State Improvement Commission, Fla., 60 So. 2d 747; Twyman v. Roell, 123 Fla. 215, 166 So. 215; State ex rel Helseth v. DuBose, 99 Fla. 812, 128 So. 4; Pell v. State, 97 Fla. 650, 122 So. 110; Myers v. Atlantic Coastline Railroad Company, Fla., 112 So. 2d 263; Anderson v. City of Miami, Fla., 101 So. 2d 612.** In the last case cited the Florida District Court of Appeal said:

> "With all due respect, it is our opinion that we should not seek so elusive a phantom as the spirit of an opinion but should consider ourselves bound

> only by those propositions held to be determinative."

To the same effect see also **State v. Florida Improvement Commission, Supra,** wherein the Supreme Court of Florida held:

> "The language above quoted was not essential to a decision in that case and is obiter dicta. It is not controlling in this case."

It is obvious that the language of the three Florida cases relied on by petitioners was not determinative of the issues before the court, and the same would therefore not be binding on the state court or a federal court, which in a diversity suit is "in effect only another court of the state." **Guaranty Trust Co. v. York, 326 U.S. 99, 108, 89 L. Ed. 2079, 2085, 65 S. Ct. 1469, 160 A.L.R. 1231.**

Petitioners suggest that Florida dicta is at least entitled to "respectful consideration." It is quite apparent from even a cursory reading of the opinion that the Fifth Circuit has not only given the Florida dicta respectful consideration, but has given each case announcing it a careful and searching analysis, and such weight as was legally permissable within the scope of the rule.

Of course, in giving respectful consideration to Florida dicta it was necessary that the court take into account all dicta bearing on the problem. The decision of the District Court of Appeal in **State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. v. Ranson, Fla. App., 121 So. 2d 175** is a persuasive case which holds that the giving of timely notice to the insurer is a condition precedent to the insurer's

liability, and failure to comply is grounds for voidance of the policy. The court said:

> "(3) The dearth of Florida law on this issue is matched, however, by an abundance of case law and textual treatment thereof from other jurisdictions. A distinction has been made by the courts between policies which expressly make compliance with the clause a condition precedent to the liability of the insurer under the policy, and those which omit such an express statement. It appears to be well settled that where the liability policy makes the insured's failure to give timely notice expressly the ground of forfeiture, or compliance therewith a condition precedent to the insurer's liability no recovery can be had where timely notice has not been given. Annotation 18 A.L.R. 2d 443; 5A Am. Jur. Auto. Ins., sec. 151; 45 C.J.S. Insurance §. 1055."

The policy in the Ranson case contained a provision identical with the case at bar, to the effect that compliance with the policy requirements is a condition precedent to recovery.

The Fifth Circuit was not without precedent because it had previously considered the precise point in two previous cases arising from Florida, interpreting the cooperation clause. We refer to the two Rexford cases, **Royal Indemnity Co. v. Rexford, 5th Cir. 1952, 197 F. 2d 83, and Rexford v. Royal Indemnity Co., 5th Cir. 1954, 215 F. 2d 693.**

In these cases involving the interpretation of Florida law, the Fifth Circuit was acting, in effect, as another court of the State, and here we are presented with a controlling precedent. The first **Rexford** case, reported in 197 F. 2d 83, is directly in point. In this case the plaintiff recovered a $35,000 judgment against the insured, and then sued out a writ of garnishment against Royal Indemnity Company to reach the proceeds of a $10,000 automobile liability policy. The garnishee set up as a defense the violation of the assistance and cooperation clause, alleging, among other things, that the assured failed to attend the trial and otherwise assist in trial preparations. The case was submitted to a jury and resulted in a verdict and judgment in favor of the plaintiff and against the garnishee. The garnishee appealed, contending, among other things, as follows:

> "There was a pretrial conference and order and a trial to a jury. Insisting throughout that, on the evidence, no fact issue was made, and it was entitled to an instruction as a matter of law, it also vigorously resisted the efforts of the plaintiff in garnishment to retry the damage suit on his theory that by doing so he could show that, granting that there was no cooperation on the part of the insured, the failure to cooperate was not material since under the evidence there was no defense to the suit.
>
> "The court, after a rather full discussion of the point, being of the opinion that the evidence bore on the materiality of the non cooperation, admitted the evidence, over objection, and the case was tried, with the inevitable result that,

with a seriously injured man and an insurance company before them, the jury was trying the question of whether the plaintiff was injured and whether he ought to recover from the insurance company, instead of trying the question whether the policy had been avoided before the trial by the failure of the insured to cooperate."

The Court of Appeals reversed the case and sent it back for a new trial, and sustained the garnishee's contention. The Court held:

"When it comes, however, to appellant's second point, that it was reversible error to permit the plaintiff in effect to retry the damage suit to show that the evidence for recovery in it was so strong that cooperation could not have done any good, and, therefore, the failure to cooperate was immaterial, and it is quite plain that the suit was tried on an erroneous theory and in such fashion that a fair verdict on the real issues in the case could not be obtained.

"The only issue for trial in the garnishment suit was whether the policy, which the garnishee had issued to the insured, was no longer of force because, before the trial of the damage suit, it had been avoided by the failure of the insured to cooperate. There is no doubt that, under all the authorities, the non cooperation must have been material. None that, in a case of this kind, there might be an issue of fact for the jury upon whether the lack of cooperation was accidental, incidental, or immaterial. It cannot, however, be

claimed that it was at all material, to the question at issue in the suit, whether there was non co-operation in a material respect, **to prove that the case was so strong that plaintiff would have gotten a verdict, no matter what the insured testified or did, and that therefore,** it was proper to in effect retry the damage suit. No case is cited, we have found none, which supports the theory on which the case was tried."

In the second **Rexford** appeal the rule was not changed or modified.

We respectfully submit that the Rexford decisions constitute a controlling precedent, and that the decision of the Circuit Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit should be affirmed.

Respectfully submitted,

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